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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001819

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER FR SY LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MICHEL EDDE ON HIS POSSIBLE ELECTION FOR PRESIDENT

Classified By: DCM William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

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¶11. (C) Former Maronite League president Michel Edde claimed to DCM and poloff over dinner on November 19 that in a meeting earlier in the day, Michel Aoun had given approval for an Edde "transitional" presidency, on a vague understanding that Edde will not serve a full six year term but resign after Parliamentary elections in the first half of ¶2009. Edde also met with Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea, of March 14, who went over with him a list of 50 questions on policy matters. They did not finish and Edde was due to see Geagea again on November 20. Edde admitted that the biggest obstacle to overcome for him to become president is the opposition of Future Movement leader Saad Hariri. He is attempting to arrange a meeting with Hariri through intermediaries.

¶12. (C) Emboffs asked Edde about Hizballah arms and arms smuggling across the Syrian border, his connection to Michel Samaha, known to be close to Syria, his views on the imprisonment of four generals implicated in impeding the investigation of the Saad Hariri assassination and his plans for a new cabinet. He avoided addressing arms smuggling to Hizballah, saying Palestinian arms were a higher priority, remained firm on his relationship with Samaha (Edde's aide later told DCM that Samaha might be needed for eventual contacts with Syria), insisted he would not free the four generals but would defend the independent judiciary and said he would not change the LAF and ISF commanders. End Summary.

MICHEL EDDE AS 'TRANSITIONAL' PERIOD FOR TWO YEARS

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¶13. (C) The DCM and PolOff met presidential candidate Michel Edde and advisor Khalil Karam in the evening on November 19 for a briefing on what Edde claimed was an effort to draft him to be Lebanon's next president. They described Edde's meetings that day with Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea and Free Patriotic Movement head Michel Aoun, and answered our questions about his presidential platform. Edde claimed that earlier that day, Aoun been generally supportive of an option of Edde becoming president for a "transitional" period. Edde avoided being pinned down on how long that period would be, but indicated that it would last until parliamentary elections scheduled for the first half of 2009. Edde described his meeting with Geagea that sounded like a job interview with Geagea, with Geagea going through a list of some 50 prepared questions on policy matters. The two did

not finish and Edde was scheduled to continue the meeting on November 20.

¶14. (C) Aoun told Edde that the obstacles to him achieving the presidency were the U.S. and March 14. Edde then offered himself as the president for an abbreviated term. Edde suggested he be president for one and a half to two years, during which time he will form a new unity cabinet which would motivate the opposition to end its downtown sit-in, and oversee the passing of a new electoral law. If the "mission is complete", Edde said, then he will resign, though he was careful not to specify a timeline. He said his resignation would also depend on the support of the Patriarch.

¶15. (C) In reaction, Aoun never explicitly gave Edde support, but Edde deduced he had it because of comments such as, "Your problem is not with me, it's with March 14. Go work on them because they will veto you." Karam speculated that Aoun is conceding because he's being told by everyone that he will not win, and he wants to preserve his chances to become president, perhaps in two years.

GEAGEA "INTERVIEWS" EDDE FOR THE PRESIDENCY

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¶16. (C) Edde reported that Geagea had a list of about fifty questions, only half of which were asked during the nearly two hour meeting. They plan to meet again November 21 to continue with the questioning. Geagea was interested in hearing what Edde planned to do about disarming Hizballah. Edde responded that first, the Palestinian refugees needed to be disarmed, and only after that could he work on Hizballah. Edde did assert that ultimately, the arms must be under state control. Geagea expressed concern about an early release of

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the four generals imprisoned over former PM Rafiq Hariri's assassination, and Edde replied that this is an issue for the judiciary branch, not for the president. Regarding the formation of a new cabinet, Edde assuaged Geagea's concern that there are not enough Christians holding high-level ministerial posts, such as Finance, and said he would remedy that.

¶17. (C) Geagea asked about who Edde would appoint to cabinet and senior positions; Edde said he was not specific. Edde told us that he prefers continuity and would like to keep General Michel Suleiman as head of the Lebanese Armed Forces, disappointing Geagea who would like to see a change. Edde also said he would keep General George Khoury as head of the Lebanese Armed Forces Intelligence unit because this position required someone with links to Syrian intelligence. As for the rest of the cabinet, Edde said it will be composed of representatives from March 14 and March 8, and that he will expand it from 24 ministers to 30 ministers.

HARIRI IS THE OBSTACLE

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¶18. (C) Edde relayed that Minister of Telecommunications and MP Marwan Hamadeh, an ally of Walid Jumblatt and close friend of Edde, told him the obstacle to his presidency was MP and head of Future Movement bloc Saad Hariri. Edde acknowledged that he and Hariri barely know each other. Edde seemed reluctant to reach out to Hariri but by the day following the dinner with emboffs, it was clear that Edde was making efforts through intermediaries to meet with Hariri. (Note: Saad Hariri and his advisors told us November 19 that Hariri would never support Edde. End note.)

BERRI EXPECTED TO SUPPORT EDDE BECAUSE HE'S THE ONLY OPTION

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¶19. (C) Speaker Nabih Berri has no freedom whatsoever to make decisions, Edde said, and he is entirely beholden to

Hizballah. When asked why Hizballah would be supporting Edde, he responded that that Berri gave him his support in the last few days because, according to Berri's brother Mahmoud Berri, they don't have any other choices.

EDDE RESPONDS TO U.S. QUESTIONS

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¶10. (C) Edde maintained his position that Hizballah's arms cannot be dealt with immediately because they are related to the issue of Palestinian arms, which should be the priority. When pressed about arms smuggling across the Syrian border, Edde talked about solving the dispute over Sheba'a Farms. He also discussed the need to address an issue Aoun had raised: amnesty for the nearly 3,000 Lebanese citizens from Southern Lebanon who fled to Israel after the assassination of Colonel Aql Hashem. He said that these issues were the best place to start because they have relatively easy solutions. After the DCM refocused Edde back to arms smuggling, he retorted, "Can the U.S. control its border with Mexico?" Toward the end of the two hour meeting, Karam interjected that smuggling is a difficult issue because it has the tacit approval from the Syrian government, the families straddling the border are both Lebanese and Syrian, and the families and soldiers profit from the smuggling. Such a problem requires a political solution, Karam added.

¶11. (C) The DCM asked Edde about his relationship with Michel Samaha, because of Samaha's past dealings with Syria. Edde remained firm in defending his relationship with Samaha as necessary for his role as someone who has good relations in all camps, saying Hizballah and others criticize him for meeting with Walid Jumblatt, and traveling often to the U.S. Edde strongly denied the rumor that he went to Syria over the weekend and presented us with his alibi. The next day, Karam told DCM that Samaha would be useful for eventual contacts with Syria.

Comment

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¶12. (C) Edde feigned reluctance to pursue the presidency aggressively with comments such as "I am questioning running myself. You need to tell me why I should run." He seemed to burst with pride, though, at being the one to convince Aoun to lower his insistence on being president and on the prospect of being the solution to the Lebanese political impasse. End comment.

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